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ABSTRACT

The views of Scottish adult literacy learners regarding existing adult literacy education and ways of improving it were examined. Input was sought through 31 focus groups that were held in five Scottish regions and involved a total of 193 adult literacy learners. Selected findings of the study were as follows: (1) although individual negotiation of course content between a literacy learner and tutor is occurring, consultation on program planning or evaluation appears occasional at best and is more often nonexistent; (2) learners and nonparticipants alike experienced difficulties in accessing learning opportunities; (3) better recognition of the diversity of learners' needs, interests, and desires is needed; (4) support for learners from tutors and peers is critical; and (5) literacy learners' aspirations for progression to other learning or employment are strikingly different from those of learners in other programs. The focus group participants expressed a desire for the following things: (1) more learning opportunities and a greater variety; (2) good-quality, adult-friendly facilities in which to learn; (3) support services, especially child care, to encourage participation in literacy programs; (4) financial assistance with costs and fees; and (5) a national effort to change the culture of learning. The adult literacy learners generally had little confidence that their views will be listened to. (MN)

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Listening to learners

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listening to learners

Consultation with Learners about Adult Literacy Education in Scotland

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Executive Summary

This report describes the consultation process carried out with adult learners to inform the development of the new strategy on adult literacy and numeracy in Scotland. The report draws out a number of important messages for policy makers, service managers and all those engaged in improving learning opportunities for adult literacy and numeracy learners.

The Learning from Experience Trust co-ordinated the research, working with WEA Scotland. Focus group discussions were convened with learners and potential learners in five Scottish regions – Lothian, Glasgow area, Fife, Aberdeen area and Highlands. In all, 31 focus groups involved a total of 193 adults: 84 literacy and numeracy learners, 80 learners in other adult education, and 29 not participating in any adult education.

Qualitative research is most useful to explore people's accounts of their experiences and ideas, and to try to understand them in context. There are some striking commonalties among the learners we talked with. There are also some deep differences among and between them in their experiences, goals and ambitions, and their sense of their own abilities. They have important messages to tell.

- **The value of consulting learners and how little is currently happening.** While there may be individual negotiation of course content between a literacy learner and tutor, consultation on programme planning or evaluation seems occasional at best, and more often non-existent. (pp. 7-11)
- **Learners' difficulties in accessing learning opportunities.** Learners and non-participants alike had very shallow information 'maps' of their learning options, mostly derived from personal and family networks. The barriers they must overcome to access learning (transport, childcare, finance, time, confidence and support) pose ongoing difficulties, to be overcome again and again. (pp. 12-14)
- **The need to better recognise the diversity of learners' needs, interests and desires.** The adult literacy and numeracy system currently has little ability to accommodate diversity. While most learners were generally happy with their current class and tutor, some would like options that were not available, including using computers and progressing to higher levels. (pp. 15-17)
- **The importance of support for learners from both tutors and peers.** Most learners identified their tutor as a crucial person in making them feel at ease, but other learners are also critical. When learners do not feel comfortable and supported they vote with their feet, and leave. (pp. 18-19)
- **Striking differences between literacy and numeracy learners and those in other programmes in terms of aspirations for progression to other learning or employment.** None of the literacy learners talked about what they planned to do next, but most of the other learners saw their current learning as only one step to meeting longer-term goals. At the same time,

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New Deal participants had a more sober analysis: they were concerned about lack of jobs and their own lack of work experience. (pp. 23-24)

- **Learners want to see more learning opportunities and a greater variety:** short and flexible courses, more intensive courses, drop-in centres and a wide variety of content areas from computers to mentoring. (pp. 25-26)
- **Learners want to see good quality, adult-friendly facilities in which to learn.** They said most of the buildings in which they currently learn are in poor physical shape: they would like buildings that are attractive on the outside (to attract people in), comfortable and informal on the inside. (pp. 26-27)
- **Learners see the need for resources to support programmes.** They want smaller class sizes and more individual attention from the tutor, access to computers as well as basic materials like books, paper and pencils. In the rural areas some would like to use video-conferencing. (p. 27)
- **Learners emphasise the importance of support services, especially childcare in encouraging participation.** Childcare needs to be offered not just for class sessions but also to support study time and visits to the library. (p. 27-28)
- **Learners would like financial assistance with costs and fees.** While literacy and numeracy classes are free, learners point out that fees for FE courses prevent progression, and that there are other costs involved in studying (supporting families). (p. 28)
- **Perhaps most of all, learners want to see a national effort to change the culture of learning.** They had many ideas about how to do this, from learners as promoters to high street 'learning shops' to TV campaigns. (pp. 29-31)
- **At the same time, learners had little confidence that their views will be listened to.** Some had little confidence that their own views are valuable, others were doubtful that learners would be heard. (pp. 31-32)

The conclusions expand more fully on these points (pp. 33-35). These emphasise that the new system supporting adult literacy and numeracy learning must listen more fully to learners at all levels – on-course evaluations, development of new programme planning and materials, wider planning and quality assurance. Learners need to feel they are important, involved and respected. Continuing feedback to learners on this and other consultation exercises will be crucial.

Acknowledgements

This report is the result of a great deal of collaborative work. Special thanks are due to Cathy Moncrieff and Alan Rea of WEA Scotland for their co-operation and hard work in ensuring that the focus groups were carried out on time and to a high quality. Thanks are due to the WEA tutors and tutor-organisers who worked on the project as co-ordinators and focus group facilitators: it is due to their dedication and hard work that the quality of the data is so high. Particular thanks to Anne Bellis and Teresa Cairns for coding the focus group transcripts, and contributing their insights to the project. Most of all, thanks are due to Catherine Macrae of the Literacy 2000 Team, who oversaw the project from beginning to end and whose clarity of thought and commitment to literacy learners made this project a pleasure to work on.

1 Introduction

The Scotland Literacy 2000 Team commissioned this independent report on learners' perspectives on adult literacy education. The Team is providing a focus for development of national policy and strategy on adult literacy and numeracy, with the expectation that these will form a more significant area of educational policy and provision in Scotland in the future. The Team has consulted with organisations in Scotland on need and provision, action required, and targets and performance indicators. Additional learner consultation was desirable so that the perspectives of learners and potential learners on the future shape of adult literacy education can be made clear and public.

The Learning from Experience Trust co-ordinated the research, working with WEA Scotland. Focus group discussions were convened with learners and potential learners in five Scottish regions. In all, 31[1] focus groups were held in January and February 2001, facilitated by experienced adult educators from the WEA, who were trained in focus group research methods.

A total of 193 adults took part in the focus groups, 84 of them literacy and numeracy learners, 80 learners in other adult education programmes, and 29 not participating in any adult education. The focus groups were in five Scottish regions – Lothian, Glasgow area, Fife, Aberdeen area and Highlands.

Each focus group brought together a small group of adult learners or potential learners (ranging from 3 to 11 participants) for about a one-and-a-half-hour discussion. Common guidelines were used for all the focus groups, tailored to the three different broad groups of participants: learners in adult literacy or numeracy programmes, learners in other adult education, and non-participants in adult learning. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity – in the report we give broad descriptions of region and type of learner, but no details that would identify individuals, organisations or institutions.

Summary of focus group participants

Region	Adult Literacy Learners	Other Adult Learners	Non-participants	TOTAL
Aberdeen Area	18	18	8	44
Highlands	5	20	12	37
Fife	22	10	0	32
Glasgow Area	17	19	5	41
Lothian	22	13	4	39
TOTAL	84	80	29	193

[1] 32 focus groups were held, but recording equipment failure in one means that the analysis is based on 31 sessions.

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Providers of adult literacy and numeracy programmes in Scotland now use several different terms for their programmes, the most common being 'Essential Skills' (ES) or 'Adult Basic Education' (ABE). We note that many providers have rejected the term 'ABE' due to the negative connotations of the word 'basic'. The term 'Essential Skills' however, can be confused with the broader 'core skills' developments in the Scottish education system. This report adopts adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) as a single term to describe programmes aimed at developing adults' skills in one or both of these areas of adult learning.

Two focus groups included learners for whom English was not their first or only language. We held discussions with one ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class in the Lothian region and one Highlands ALN group included both native English speakers and ESOL learners. ESOL participants are included with other ALN learners in the focus group analysis, but are noted separately where appropriate.

For the most part in this report, literacy learners are simply designed as ALN learners. However, the focus groups included learners in ALN programmes in several different institutional settings. The largest number of ALN participants were in programmes run by Local Authorities, usually in community settings, and by voluntary organisations (a total of 53 participants). These are designated in the text as ALN learners. Other adult literacy and numeracy learners were in courses run by Further Education colleges or training providers, either in college or community settings (a total of 31 participants). These are designated in the text as ALN/FE learners.

Most 'Other Adult Learners' were in Return to Learn and similar programmes that enable people return to education; some were in FE vocational programmes or New Deal; and one was a creative writing class in a community mental health project.

Most non-participants were in other kinds of groups – a women's group, family centre, Homestart and a community group.

The focus group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed, then checked by the facilitator. Coding was carried out using NU*DIST software by Teresa Cairns and Anne Bellis, experienced qualitative researchers. The analysis and report were developed by Dr Juliet Merrifield of the Learning from Experience Trust.

Qualitative research like this is most useful to explore people's accounts of their experiences and ideas, and to try to understand them in context. The analysis in this report looks at both commonalties and differences. There are, for example, some striking commonalties in use of language among the learners we talked with – 'fitting in', 'confidence', 'own pace', and 'feeling stupid'.

There are also some deep differences among and between the groups of learners in their experiences, goals and ambitions, and their sense of their own abilities. The analysis of difference is limited by the small numbers of cases within some categories (e.g. comparing ALN learners in Local Authority run programmes with those in Further Education college programmes has to be tentative[2]). This research offers a broad overview, and it is hoped that future consultation will explore specific questions in more depth.

[2] Because of the small number of cases, the different institutional settings among ALN learners are noted in the analysis only where there were striking differences in their views or experiences.

2 Consultation with Learners

Learners are not often asked for their ideas, although it will be clear from the rest of this report that they have much to suggest about ways that adult education could be better. We asked about several different aspects of learner involvement: negotiation of course content, planning and evaluation of programmes, as well as the existence of formal student representatives or forums.

The focus groups revealed how little consultation with learners is currently happening. In local authority run and voluntary organisation literacy and numeracy programmes there appears to be some level of individual negotiation of course content between individual learners and their tutor. There is very little collective discussion of course content. Consultation on programme planning or evaluation seems occasional at best. The people we talked to had remarkably little experience of formal student representation, unless they were in FE colleges, in which case they were likely to feel the system didn't work for them (whether because as adults they felt marginal to the college representation system, or because they felt the representatives were not responded to).

a) Negotiation of course content

Negotiation with individual learners about the content of their learning varies greatly from one type of programme to another. ALN programmes seem especially likely to offer some kind of flexibility to learners in terms of choosing what they want to work on and when. In many of these schemes, learners seem to be aware that they could ask their tutor to work on particular skill areas. When asked 'who decides what you do in your class?' several students gave comments similar to this person:

> *'Overall [tutors] but we have an influence on everything that we do ourselves, because if we need help with something I'll say to [tutor] I'm not managing this very well, and she'll say well, why don't you try it this way and she'll bring in different sheets to maybe look at things from a different aspect. So although the course picks out which different subjects you're going to cover we'll have a bit of input into how you're doing it.'* ***[Lothian, ALN Learner]***

Some (but not many) learners said they had set their own learning goals at the beginning – *'at my first meeting it was literally to find out what I wanted, not what she was going to do for me'*. But we will see below that other ALN learners were not confident that they could say what they wanted to learn, and preferred an 'expert' to tell them what they needed.

Most of the other adult learners said there is very limited negotiation of course content. The learners in Return to Learn classes, for example, said they could choose a topic they were interested in to research and write about, but they had no other choices or options. The programme is tightly structured. In the most tightly structured courses, learner choice is limited to choosing which worksheet to work on, like in this New Deal course: *'I ask for some of it myself. Helen mentioned stores sheets and I said I would have a go at that, because the boy I sit beside he was doing it, and I had a look at it and I thought that looks quite interesting.'*

[Fife, Other Adult Learner]

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Other participants in more flexible community-based provision felt they had more choices. For example, a learner in a creative writing class said:

> *'We were allowed to put forward ideas. If we weren't terribly sure about grammar we asked if we could get something on that one of the times, and if we were maybe not so good with paragraphing and things like that we could have that on one of the other days.'* ***[Fife, Other Adult Learner]***

We only had one example of a course where learners as a group choose the programme. In this case, learners said they started with a more or less blank sheet, and as a group planned the programme:

> *'We had choices in everything, it was all talked about and decided what we as a group wanted and each person had a say in what to do... We were given the guidelines and then we had to fill in the blanks... We set our own timetable, and after all our discussions it was decided and then our tutor organised everything that we wanted to do.'* ***[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]***

As we will see below, learners had very different attitudes about how much they should be able to negotiate course content (see section 2e).

b) Consultation for future programme planning

Many learners felt that there should be consultation with learners about what courses to offer, although they had little experience of this happening. Learners in courses outside ALN were most likely to feel they knew what they wanted and had a right to be consulted.

> *'If it wasn't for the learners there wouldn't be the courses because they've got to have the people there to do the courses, and therefore they've got to do the courses to suit the people.'*
>
> *'We know what we need, don't we? We know what we're looking for.'*
>
> *'We know what we want.'*
>
> ***[Highlands, Other Adult Learners]***

Despite this, most learners had no experience of being asked what they thought the programmes should offer. In two ALN focus groups a tutor present said that some consultation had been done in the programme – but either some time ago (2 years) or in a daytime only meeting (excluding most employed learners). None of the learners in the focus group had taken part in these. Consultation on non-learners (potential learners) is even more rare. A focus group of non-participants were part of a women's group, and said they had all put in requests for classes they wanted to see offered at their centre. Not only were the classes not offered but there had been no response, telling them why not:

> *'We suggested that, we've all put the lists in.'*
>
> *Q. 'And what happened?'*
>
> *A. 'Nothing. They've no really come back and said OK then, we're going to start a yoga class, a cooking class or anything.'*
>
> *Q. 'How long have you been waiting?'*
>
> *A. 'I'd say a year.'*
>
> ***[Lothian, Non-participants]***

When learners get no response or feedback to consultation efforts they are discouraged from participation in future consultation.

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c) Evaluation, feedback and problem-solving

Consistent opportunities for learners to evaluate their course and feed back their experiences to management seem rare. Some learners said that one organisation in particular regularly uses feedback and evaluation sheets. But most learners in other programmes had not been asked for their views.

One might expect that learners would have an opportunity to evaluate each course they take part in – being asked about content, tutor, resources and so on. In practice most of the learners we talked to were not aware that such an evaluation takes place. One focus group talked about an 'assessment sheet' they filled in on the course, and their views. Several other groups said they felt confident that they could speak to their tutor and be listened to, but nothing more formal. In fact, if they were to have a problem with their tutor (which none said they did) there would be no avenues of redress.

One of the few examples of an evaluation questionnaire was criticised by learners (in a community-based literacy and numeracy programme) because it was not confidential:

Q. 'How easy is it to fill in?'

A. 'Well, put it this way, it's got your name at the top ...you've got these tutors standing above you looking over your shoulder. You've got a form with your name on the top, are you going to put I hate the tutor, she stinks?... Especially when it's the tutor who's going to be giving you a grade.'

[Glasgow, ALN Learner]

d) Formal mechanisms for representation and consultation

There are very few examples in the focus groups of formal systems of student representation, committees or forums. One community-based programme had tried a student forum three years before, but found it didn't work well and had reverted to more informal methods.

Another ALN programme was said to have a management committee but the focus group learners did not know who was on it.

Other adult learners were somewhat more likely to say that they had avenues for evaluation and problem solving than did ALN learners. One group spoke about a monthly meeting in their organisation – but said that the meetings 'are usually going over minutes of the last meeting'. Nevertheless, it provides a formal structure within which problem solving can take place. As the same focus group explained:

'We did have a say last time when we had been attending a group and there were things in the group that weren't going as they should have gone, and it was a general consensus of the group that this was the case. So yes, we did speak up and two or three of us said this is not how we want it to be, and it was taken notice of. Yes, definitely.' ***[Fife, Other Adult Learner]***

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The only examples of formal student representatives were in the focus groups with FE learners. In one ALN/FE focus group there were two class representatives, both ESOL students, who said:

> *'There is a meeting twice a year and they ask the other students what do you need, and are you happy about that, and then there is one person in the group and they are going to represent the group, and then they speak to the council. We tell if we are happy or unhappy.'*
>
> ***[Lothian, ALN/FE Learner]***

The other FE groups were less positive about the actual practice of the student representative system:

> *'I'm the student rep for my catering class, but none of them listen. We are trying to get a bus shelter for the car park because everybody is just standing there but they've rejected that because they say we haven't got the money – they are just building on extra bits to the college.'*
>
> ***[Aberdeen, Other Adult Learner]***

Everyone in that focus group, including the student rep., said they were not involved in planning courses or programmes at all. The FE-based learners on the whole (both ALN and Other Adult Learners) were mostly not impressed with formal mechanisms for student representation – they either didn't know about them, didn't feel they applied to adult part-time learners, or didn't think management listened anyway.

One ALN group in an FE college discussed student involvement as something removed from what they might do. One person said *'we're not really students here, we're just like in a way visitors, because we've got different jobs, the only reason we come here is to learn how to read and write.'*

[Fife, ALN/FE Learner]

Asked about student involvement this person interpreted 'students' as meaning '18 and 19 year olds', not the adult learners, and he didn't want to see them involved in his course.

The most positive experience with a learner forum was reported from Edinburgh, where a group called ALFIE provided a city-wide forum of adult learners. One of the focus group participants had been a member of a literacy and numeracy group within ALFIE, and had positive experiences from it. The group had input into policy development in the city, and had even taken a trip to London to make their views known. However, he said the group had since been disbanded.

e) Attitudes and perceptions

There were mixed feelings among the learners we talked with about their role in consultation and evaluation. Although many learners would like to be listened to, there was a sizeable group of ALN learners who felt they did not know enough to be consulted – they would like an 'expert' to tell them what they need to learn.

The most unconfident learners were those who know they have literacy and numeracy needs, and have not been long in their programmes. These were most likely to say that decisions about programme content should be left to the experts.

'I wouldn't know how to start to change anything.'

'I wouldn't want it. It's for them to decide what type of courses they want to do.'

'It would be better if somebody told us what we would be doing, show us what we would be doing.' ***[Fife, ALN Learner]***

Focus group participants raised other problems with the concept of learners having a significant role in planning their own programme. One concern is about how much time it would take. Another problem is with the expectation that involvement in a committee or similar group would pose reading and writing demands that are too great for literacy and numeracy learners. *'I wouldn't want that, too much paperwork. Too much reading and writing and I wouldn't do that. Not until I was confident about my reading and writing.'* ***[Glasgow, ALN Learner]***

Other adult learners especially had concerns that consultation for course planning would raise so many different interests among learners that consensus would be hard to obtain:

'Perhaps a certain amount of input but that could lead to it being awkward because you would have a dozen people all with entirely different ideas and the timespan that it has to be done over you would never be able to cover them all.

[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

Learners in programmes other than ALN on the whole had much more confidence that their own perspective is valuable and should be listened to. They thought they should have a voice.

'Adults should be able to tell you what they want to learn, not what you want them to learn.'

'The course that I'm doing, everybody has agreed that the way they've done the modules and everything is all back to front. They are asking for feedback for the next year's course and we are able to put our points of view forward, because it's only really if you are actually doing the course you can see it from a student's point of view.' ***[Aberdeen, Other Adult Learners]***

3 Accessing learning opportunities

To be able to access learning opportunities one has to know what is available (information) and be able to enrol (overcome the barriers). Both aspects of access seem quite limited among the learners and non-participants we talked to. Even though the learners had actually accessed a course, they had limited information about their range of options, and faced ongoing barriers to their participation.

a) Getting information

Most of the focus group participants have very limited information about their learning options. This was true both for ALN and other adult learners, as well as the non-participants. Many of the people on courses found their way there through family or friends, or by referrals. They have very shallow information maps of their adult education opportunities. They know about the programme they are in, and usually the local college, but they know little about other learning opportunities near their homes. Non-participants had similar limited information about learning options. Most of them felt that what they knew about was not sufficiently local, not accessible, and/or not offering topics that would interest them. While they expressed an interest in learning they had no specifics in mind.

The main routes for getting information on courses taken by the learners we talked were:

- Personal networks – used by the great majority of learners. These include especially friends and family members, but also groups they are involved in (mother and baby club, toddler group, family centre).
- Referrals – also used by a substantial number of learners. These include social workers and care workers, health visitors and occupational therapists, employers and union (UNISON), other courses, but most of all the Job Centre or 'buroo'. However, in one area people said no-one would ever go and ask at the Job Centre – *'the Job Centre has got a terrible reputation round the work, nobody in their right mind will go to ask them for information, because you're not treated nice.'*

  [Highlands, Other Adult Learner]

- Self-directed by investigating a range of information sources – used by a smaller number of learners, and more especially other learners than ALN learners. Resources used include ads in newspapers and television (several mentions of LearnDirect), leaflets brought home by children from school, going directly to the local college and asking about courses. However, one person had phoned LearnDirect to ask about German courses in her area and was told to look in her local paper – so she did not think they would be helpful to people wanting literacy classes. Libraries were mentioned by several people, but in most cases they had only discovered the library as an information source through their class, and they noted there are so many brochures at the library that it's confusing.

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b) Barriers to access

Adult learners face barriers to entering learning – that much is well known. What is striking in the focus group discussions is how the barriers are not simply overcome once on the way into a class, but are faced again and again. Barriers have to be constantly overcome – a crèche may be offered but what about childcare for studying time, or visiting a library to prepare a project? A course may be free but what about bus fares to get there? Confidence may be building, but ALN learners may still not be ready to take the next step for a range of reasons.

The focus group participants spoke about many barriers that get in the way of their learning, for themselves and for others they know:

- Embarrassment about others knowing that one has difficulty with reading and writing – *'When I first came here I was so embarrassed at the thought of sitting with my tutor and somebody coming in and seeing me with her. Now it doesn't bother me, I've got over that.'*

  [Highlands, ALN Learner]

  For others the stigma is still there, and they are not yet ready to tell other people about it.
- Not knowing what is available, and not having the confidence to ask. Many people said others just do not know what is available and do not have sources they can ask. *'If there was some sort of group set up to help people get back into education and get advice from to help you on the way. Because it's really hard doing things by yourself.'*

  [Aberdeen, Other Adult Learner]
- Not being able to cope – *'They don't have the courage to just come into it and see what it's like ... they have the feeling that it is something they couldn't cope with.'*

  [Fife, Other Adult Learner].
- Childcare – for parents (especially single parents) with young children, learning can only be accessed if childcare is provided. And even if there is a créche during class time, these people have difficulty in getting studying done outside of class time because of the demands of family life. It can be 9 pm before they can open their books to study, once the children are in bed and the chores done.
- Costs – not only for the course itself, but also for transport, childcare, and (for the vocational courses that offer intensive preparation for work) the need to generate income to maintain the family. One learner said that there was support for the unemployed and for single mothers, but not for her, a married woman with children, who could nevertheless not afford course fees.
- Time – for people who are working it is finding a class that they can fit in with work schedules, for mothers it is finding a class that can be accommodated with children's needs, for some it is not wanting to take a bus somewhere at night. Others felt that the college courses they knew about were too big a commitment of time — they would have to go full time, or several days a week, or commit themselves for a whole year. What they wanted instead was something short, flexible and accessible that could lead to something else.

Fear: Perhaps the biggest barrier to learning is fear. The adults in literacy and numeracy classes talked about having 'butterflies in my stomach', a 'sore stomach', bursting into tears in the first class. They talked about their fear of walking in the door. Their fears are of two main forms (which often come together): fear of the unknown, and fear of what others will think.

Fear of the unknown is common to other adult learners too – the focus group participants in other programmes talked about wondering if they would be able to do the work, anxiety about having to write or speak in front of a group. Some of the Return to Learn participants talked about how hard their first day was – confronted with a lot of paperwork, a book, having to answer the tutor's questions. *'I think maybe when we came we got the book handed to us and we read what we had to do. I think that was quite frightening right from the start. I know folks that I worked with thought I'll never be able to do that and they just didn't bother coming back.'*

[Fife, Other Adult Learner]

Most of the learners didn't know the people in their class beforehand, and this made them shy. One class in a focus group had several people who had known each other before and they talked about how this had made it easier for them.

ALN learners in particular had another kind of fear to overcome – fear of what other people will think. They are conscious of the stigma attached to literacy learning, and worry that 'people will think I'm stupid'. *'When I first started I was as nervous as a wreck and I knew what I had and I felt ashamed at the time.'*

[Glasgow, ALN Learner]

'I think some of them don't want to come because they are ashamed of not being able to do it, they think it's a stigma on them.'

'I think they are scared in case people think they are stupid or something.'

[Fife, ALN Learners]

Asked whether they knew someone who might be interested in a course but didn't want to come along, focus group participants mostly did know such people. In some cases they did not know what was available. In other cases they did not feel it was for them:

'I do know a couple of people that I have mentioned it to, and one person said they thought it was actually for people who were illiterate, and there was another girl who thought it was all going to be too advanced for her and she couldn't cope with it. So maybe a wee bit more information on the level that you are working at.'

[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

Attitudes: Accessing learning is about attitudes as well as information. One other learner described telling his oldest son about starting the course:

'He smiled. I said what are you smiling for? He said what are you doing that for, you've been through all that, why are you doing that? His attitude seems to be that he's been through school, he's now an adult, he's done enough, he's got a job and he doesn't need to do anything else. I said, well, it's always good to go and try and learn something new, son, I'd rather do that than sit and watch the TV. But his attitude was amusement.'

[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

Behind some of the barriers lie cultural attitudes towards learning that are slow to change. People who didn't do well in school are regarded as 'thick'. People think once you're through with school why go back? Studying is seen as too difficult, and not for people like me. These attitudes do change and can change, but only slowly. In their recommendations, learners suggested more could be done to change the culture of learning.

Diversity

The focus groups reveal considerable diversity in terms of the characteristics of adult learners. They show less diversity in terms of provision to meet so many different needs and interests.

a) Diversity of learners

Several of the ALN learners we talked to emphasised that 'everyone is different', that all ALN learners are not all the same. They wanted to make sure that there is variety in provision so that different needs and interests can be accommodated. This research showed diversity among adult literacy and numeracy learners in terms of age and social context, with young mothers, employed people and older people, all working together on literacy and numeracy.

'We're all different ages, we all want different things and we've all got different levels of education.'

'And we all function fine when we're together.'

'It doesn't make any difference that I'm going to be 40 and she's 21.'

'In fact we all help each other.'

[Lothian, ALN learner]

The focus groups also documented inclusion in ALN programmes of people with learning difficulties of various kinds, including dyslexia, mental health problems as well as a stroke victim. The focus groups showed limited diversity in terms of ethnicity, but this may not reflect a true picture for adult education in Scotland as a whole. We had one ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class in the Lothian region and one Highlands group that included both native English speakers and ESOL learners.

b) Diversity of provision

ALN's ability to accommodate diversity is not so clear. There is diversity of provision in the sense that classes are offered at different times of the day, and in different sites – although non-participants said either they did not know about local provision or there was nothing nearby that met their needs.

There does not seem to be a wide range of learning approaches in ALN. The ALN classes we heard about mostly offer individualised instruction in a group setting. They did not offer everything the learners were interested in. Some wanted to learn to use computers, but few were available. Some wanted the chance to progress to higher levels, taking Standard Grades and Highers in English, for example, but that was not offered. Although they offered choices, as we saw above, the range was not great. In some of the ALN programmes, learners felt they had a lot of choices about what to work on. In others, the learners said their tutor decides what they work on. Sometimes learners are happy to have the tutor

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decide, because they don't have the confidence to feel they know what they should be doing. Others would like more options.

The traditional ALN approach is for a group of learners to spend most of their time working independently on their own activities. The teacher moves around to spend time with each. It solves the problem of having different levels of learners within the same group, with different interests, and creates a sense of choice individualised learning. However, when the group is large it is not easy for the tutor to give the time to each that they want.

'It's quite a mixed group this, but [tutor] is still able to go round everybody because it's not a big group.'

'If it was a really big group and people are at different levels it would be harder.'

[Glasgow, ALN Learners]

The few speakers of other languages wanted more intensive language learning. They pointed out that people are often immersed in a community of their own language speakers, and have little chance to practise English outside the class. They wanted a chance to practise talking with English speakers as well as one-to-one instruction. The focus group that combined members of ALN and ESOL classes enjoyed talking to each other so much that they made plans to keep meeting informally.

'I want to have a natural conversation with other people so I used to go to college, but college study is different from what I want to do, so I asked my tutor to have a daily conversation, and she encouraged me to speak with no purposes. If I go to shop I have a purpose, natural conversation has no purpose.'

[Highlands, ALN/ESOL Learner]

The ALN learners we talked with, while generally happy with their current class, had had other experiences in which they had not been happy or felt like they 'fitted in'. Sometimes creating a 'happy family' atmosphere can be exclusionary – new people coming in may feel left out, or people who are not 'like us' may feel excluded. One Deaf learner in an ALN programme said that it had been difficult for him to come into the class *'because of the way other people have treated me when I ask for help, and put me down'*. However, in his current class he said *'I feel good about it, because I've not had the prejudice that I sometimes get in a group.'*

[Lothian, ALN Learner]

Beyond his earlier problems with prejudice, this learner pointed out that ALN programmes found it hard to get funding for the sign language interpreter he needed. His tutor said *'it wasn't easy to convince people that [interpreter] should be paid to help [learner] in this group ... we just take the money from bits and pieces that have been underspent, but it's not something that's been budgeted for.'* ***[Glasgow, ALN tutor]***

Several of the focus group 'other adult learners' were in quite tightly structured programmes, not at basic levels but still aimed at people with few qualifications who have been out of school for a long time. In some of these programmes, choices can be made of what to write about, for example, but not about writing.

Allowing choice is partly a matter of philosophy and educational approach. But it also requires resources, in terms of tutor time and materials. Not all basic level courses have the resources needed to enable people to work on different things. In some groups, learners said that their tutor was so busy with other learners that they didn't like to ask for the amount of help they really needed. In one ALN class in an FE college, the learners talked about the need for 'different ranges of reading books'.

'In our class there are three levels, there's a couple of people that are not at a stage and there's somebody that is at a stage, and another two people that are higher. Giving a book to somebody that is quite low in the class doesn't really challenge them, but if somebody is quite low in the class and they get a hard book it will be difficult for them.'

[Fife, ALN/FE Learner]

c) Control

Most ALN learners attend classes voluntarily, and their ultimate form of control over their learning is not to attend. We held focus groups with two New Deal groups, in which unemployed people are required to attend classes or lose their benefits. Understandably these groups were resentful about being forced into learning, even though most felt they were learning. One of the Return to Learn groups also talked about being required to attend:

'One of the first things is we were told by our management that we were going on this course. The second thing was we didn't know what the course was about... I think most adults don't like being treated like kids. Everybody's got an opinion about something and if you ask them they'll give you it, but if you talk to them like kids they'll just shy away from it.'

[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

Perhaps the most important way in which learners feel they have control over their learning is in the sense that they can go at their own pace, and in this most of the ALN learners were content. ALN learners said *'you haven't got a time limit, they don't rush you.'* ***[Fife, ALN Learner]***

'There's no set time limit, if you have done a mistake you're given the chance to rectify it.'

[Glasgow, ALN Learner]

It is this control over pace that distinguishes adult education from their earlier, unsuccessful, school experiences. But it is important to note that controlling pace does not necessarily mean going more slowly. One ESOL group wanted their teachers to push them more. *'If I work for just two hours and then close up nothing can be improved. If teacher say you must do homework and the next day check up, I think I improve quicker.'*

[Lothian, ALN/FE Learner]

In this respect, the ESOL learners differed from other ALN learners.

5 Support and guidance

Given the level of fear and nervousness that accompanies enrolling in a literacy and numeracy class, what makes learners feel included? Where do they get the support needed? Two main factors emerge from the focus group discussions: the tutor's role in making learners feel comfortable and at ease, and the role of other learners in the class.

a) Tutor's role

Learners in most of the kinds of programmes talked about how important their tutor was in making them feel at ease in a difficult situation. They recognise that having the right person as tutor is crucial. One learner in an FE college contrasted the progress she was making in subjects she had taken at school but never enjoyed then: *'It's the tutors. They are really, really helpful and they're so friendly and they never treat you the way a teacher would. They treat you as a human being and if you need help they'll take the time to try and help you.'*

[Lothian, Other Adult Learner]

There are several characteristics that learners used to describe good tutors:

- Friendly and welcoming – making the class feel like 'one big family', breaking the ice and getting people talking to one another
- Reassuring – understanding the fears and concerns of adult learner, and assuring them that they will be able to manage the work. *'I listened quite carefully to the things that you were saying and I knew by the end of it you would never put anybody in a spot, you would just let people take their time about anything.'*

[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

- Treating everyone as an individual – helping them find things they want to work on, finding the right level for them (not too difficult but not too easy)
- Patient and non-judgemental
- Leading without dominating
- Above all, treating people as *'adults, not weans'* ***[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]***.

One focus group teased apart the elements in good tutoring in this exchange:

'I've heard of people going to courses and they've walked in the door and they've taken one look at the tutor and gone, oh no. It does happen, we were really lucky. [Tutor]'s style of tutoring is good and she's got a good sense of humour.'

'Yes, I think a tutor has a lot to do with whether you enjoy the course or not.'

'She was very informal but we got done what we were supposed to do, but in a nice way.'

'That's quite a hard thing to do, to be the tutor without taking a head role, to actually integrate yourself in with the students.'

'Instead of saying you will do this, you will do it that way, as a teacher.'

'[Tutor] kept control of the situation, actually led you to where you were supposed to be without being dominant.'

[Highlands, Other Adult Learners]

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b) Other learners' roles

The tutor may set the tone for the class, but other learners are also crucial to the sense of comfort that keeps learners there. One group talked about a woman who had been in their class but left because she felt others were laughing at her (even though they said they weren't). In several of the groups, learners talked about helping each other and working together.

Other learners in the group have an important role in helping new members feel welcome and at home – in creating a sense of 'family' or making new friends. *'I look forward to coming here, it's a social event as well as an educational event.'*

[Fife, ALN Learner]

This may be especially important for people who don't have a large family or circle of friends outside. *'I thought I wouldn't be able to do it when I got into my 60s, but it's easier now. I meet more friends instead of staying at home and doing housework all the time and taking the dog for a walk.'*

[Fife, ALN Learner]

The sense that everyone is in the same boat makes it easier for ALN learners, as well as for those who are going back to learning after many years away from it. *'You feel that everyone's here for the same reason as you, so you don't feel put down.'*

[Lothian, ALN Learner]

However, a few learners talked about experiences they had had in earlier classes that were not as positive, where they didn't feel that they could fit into the group as well.

6 Learning progress

Everyone's main purpose in coming to class is to make progress and learn. How that learning is recognised varies considerably. For many of the learners we talked with progress is tutor-defined or defined in terms of passing modules and getting certificates. For other learners, the key to progress is in the things they can do that they couldn't before.

a) Tutor-defined progress

Most of the ALN learners in the focus groups talked about the important role of their tutor in reviewing and affirming their progress. They wanted that feedback because they were not sure of their own ability to assess progress:

'It helps for somebody outside to give you an opinion of how you're doing.'

'Yes, [tutor] makes a point of telling you that you are making progress in case you don't see it yourself.'

[Glasgow, ALN Learner]

These learners say they may underestimate their own abilities, or not be sure whether they are really making progress, so the tutor's role in recognising their learning is important – *'being Scottish women we don't tend to give ourselves the pat on the back that we deserve.'*

[Lothian, ALN Learner]

At the same time, some say that they want their review with their tutor to be an individual one, not in front of the group. *'If you're actually getting told in front of a group of people that you aren't doing it right, it would actually go against somebody, that would put them on a downer.'*

[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

It seems likely that this desire for privacy would vary according to how close-knit a group is, and how comfortable learners are with each other. Most ALN learners did not say they wanted tutor reviews to be private, and this probably reflects their feeling of being comfortable in the group.

For learners in more structured programmes, progress is defined in terms of tests and modules passed, credit gained and certificates acquired. In one FE college programme, learners say:

'They take an assessment and if you pass it they tell you.'

'My tutor in one class has got a folder and she said you've just finished outcome one and two. I'm starting outcome three, started it on Monday and she said we'll get that finished before Easter.'

'I think you should get congratulated a bit more for the work you've put in because you're putting a lot of effort in just to hear one word, you've passed.'

[Lothian, Other Adult Learners]

The need for some outside recognition of progress and the effort it has taken lies behind a desire of some learners to have a certificate to show. *'I think it's nice to have something at the end of the day, to be able to say I have done this... and your family are proud of you.'*

[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]

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While most of the learners we talked to felt they were making progress, some talked about earlier classes they had taken where they did not feel they made progress.

> *'Coming here, we are trying to accommodate everybody in the class, but it doesn't happen everywhere else. They just seem to continue on with the same things, they don't seem to go anywhere. That's what I found with the other classes – when you finished something basically you just went back to the beginning and started all over again.'*
>
> ***[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]***

b) Learner-defined progress

While some ALN learners depended on their tutors telling them they are making progress, defined in terms of acquisition of skills, other learners talked about progress in terms of application of skills in their everyday literacy practices. Some of the practical examples of things they can do now that they couldn't do earlier are:

- Write my postcode
- Write out forms and order from catalogues
- Write my address properly
- Read books
- Pick up a free newspaper on the bus and read it
- Write letters to a son who has just gone away to college, instead of picking up the phone
- Write a business letter on the computer
- Conversation (ESOL learners) – *'I can argue back and I can be funny. People laugh at my jokes.'*
- Pass the driving test (another ESOL learner)
- Helping a son with his homework – *'Just now I'm helping him and I was doing the maths and that and I'm coming along with them so I can sort of help him out with that now, before I just used to sit there and go "don't know". I used the excuse, "Oh, they did it different when I was at school" and things like that. But now I'm sort of helping him along with it. That's how I know I'm improving myself.'*

  [Glasgow, ALN Learner]
- Job-related skills including doing menus, writing orders, calculating volume in colouring and permanent wave.

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Closely bound up with progress in terms of application of skills is increasing confidence. Some learners talked about going to shops on their own for the first time, because of the increased confidence the class had given them. Others talked about having the confidence to apply for jobs. Some learners who had gone through mental illness felt their course had helped them regain lost confidence:

> *'I found out about [the course] through my social worker and I see this like a stepping stone to going back to college. Coming out of a mental illness you lose a lot of confidence and I feel that my time here has been helping build my confidence back up to what it used to be.'*
>
> ***[Aberdeen, Other Adult Learner]***

For many people, building skills and confidence go together.

> *Because when you learn stuff you are getting to use it all the time and when you really need it, it's there. You're not so worried any more, your confidence is built up and you're more able to use the things that you have learned.'*
>
> ***[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]***

This creates a positive spiral, in which learning progress boosts confidence, which increases the ability to use what has been learned and to learn more.

> *'It's helped me to stretch my imagination and also my outlook, and it's helped me to look further as regards anything really, jobs, situations, social, entertainment, anything. It's helped me branch out a little bit further, because beforehand I used to think that's no good, there's no chance, there's no point. But it doesn't really matter whether there's a chance or there isn't, I just go ahead and do it... I found at the start of each course I would look at it and think no way, I can't do this, and then at the end of the course I thought wow, I've done that. I think it's increased my confidence.'*
>
> ***[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]***

Progression

One of the most striking differences that emerged in this consultation was between ALN and other adult learners on the question of progression. None of the ALN learners talked about their hopes or plans for progression to other things when they had completed their course. They talked about making progress, about things they could do, about increasing confidence. They did not talk about what next.

Other learners, in contrast, on the whole saw their current course as a route to something else – a job or a better job, further learning. These learners knew where they wanted to go, and how their course was helping them. The majority of learners are UNISON members in public service jobs, but some were in New Deal and other second chance programmes. Their ambitions are clear:

- Social work – *'It's given me confidence to maybe go on to other aspects of social work that I've been interested in, but I was always frightened of forms and application forms and stuff. I would be more confident now trying to fill them in.'*

  [Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

  'My dream would be to become a social worker. I'd really like to come here and get more education and go on to college and do an Access course and then go into social work.' ***[Lothian, Other Adult Learner]***

- Passing an examination – *'The initial idea for us coming on this course was actually helping me to get on a set examination that I've already sat and failed, I think it's helped me to understand how to put answers down to questions.'*

  [Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

- Nursing – *'Mine was for the nursing. That I would need certain qualifications to enter nursing and I realised I'd have to wait. I could have gone by the Access route but I decided at the time that I would see what I would need over the next year and then just go straight in.'*

  [Lothian, Other Adult Learner]

- Going to college – *'I want to do my level three in social care and then do my HSC so I really don't feel I've got the right basic education to go on to college with everyone else. I feel like I'd be behind because I've got a real problem with my English, my spelling and my writing. So doing this when I pass it I'll know that I can do it, and I can go on to college.'*

  [Lothian, Other Adult Learner]

- Applying for jobs – whether they are currently employed or unemployed:

  'I've shocked myself, going to do this Open University course, computing courses, I've applied for this other job. I just felt it gave me the confidence to go and do things, write things, say things. I didn't always have the confidence, ideas would be in here but I wouldn't say it, now I just think I'm going to say it, if I'm wrong, I'm wrong.'

  [Fife, Other Adult Learner]

  'Starting on the course gave you confidence with your writing and all that. Before that I wouldn't have bothered applying for anything, I didn't have the confidence to fill them in, how to write it down and fill in an application form, some of the application forms are like the Bible, they are unreal.'

  [Fife, Other Adult Learner]

Members of one single Return to Learn focus group, who had just completed their course, had the following plans:

- Open University course over nine months in Health and Social Care
- Computers in the local college
- Extended Role of Auxiliaries course
- An Access Course hoping to lead to a Diploma Course in Social Work at the Northern College.

One has the sense that these courses were 'opening doors' for people, through which they learned about options they didn't know they had, and came to believe in their ability to try new things. That sense of learning as a progression to something else one might want to do does not emerge from the ALN groups.

The New Deal groups, however, had a more sobering analysis of their potential for progression. What they want is to get a job, but there are many barriers, and the learning programme addresses only some of them. They say their reading and writing are poor, but they also say that the jobs are not there (the factories that used to provide jobs are closing), employers hire school leavers in preference to older people (to get a tax break), and that they have been out of work so long they do not have experience to offer. They would like to see work placements offered as well as working on their literacy and numeracy. They want to have choices in these – to be offered say, four and choose one. They would also like to see employers offered government subsidies to take on older workers with poor literacy and numeracy and give them a chance to show they can do the job.

Learner recommendations

Given the opportunity, the learners we talked to have many suggestions about how adult literacy and numeracy education could be extended and improved in Scotland. Although a few students felt unable to make specific recommendations, most had plenty to say once they were asked. It is perhaps typical of learners in literacy and numeracy classes that many suggested any extra money should not be spent on them but on improving schools – so that no-one need ever leave without having good literacy and numeracy.

One New Deal group felt the priority should be job creation, not skills development, because without the jobs the skills can't be used:

'Trying to improve you getting a job.'

'If they built more factories, they are always shutting something down. They shut it down and it goes away down to England but we can't go away down to England to get a job. I think the money should be created to make more jobs. That's what I think.' ***[Fife, Other Adult learners]***

However, when encouraged to think about learning for adults, there was a wealth of recommendations including:

- More courses
- Better facilities
- Expanded resources including staffing
- Increased support services including transport and childcare
- Financial assistance with costs and fees
- Publicity and how to reach more people.

a) More courses

The main suggestion from people who are in courses was for 'more courses'. Learners want to see a greater variety of courses on offer, in local settings. Participants in the focus groups had suggestions about both the format of courses and their content.

In terms of format, there was a call for:

- More intensive courses (offered more than one day a week);
- Short and modular courses, to hold people's interest and attention;
- More follow-up, so that one course follows on another without a long gap (especially over the summer);
- Flexible courses, and drop-in centres where they can get help;
- Small groups so that learners can support each other;
- Workplace-based courses (although they had doubts about whether employers would want them);
- One group would like to see some residential short courses, a few days of intensive learning away from family demands.

Thinking about the content of courses, the main emphasis was on reading and writing, but computers were often demanded.

- There was a strong feeling that the ability to use computers is essential in the modern age, and most participants had not had the opportunity to learn about computers in school. Those that were using computers (and the few who had computers at home) said how helpful they were in writing.
- Beyond computers there were other courses suggested by only one or a few people – maths, history, geography, psychology and counselling, creative writing.

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- Some of the non-participants were most interested in courses for their own personal development, not necessarily for getting a job – *'anything from art appreciation to German conversation, a DIY course, basic wiring and plumbing, joinery skills, cooking.'*

  [Highlands, Non-participant]

- One group suggested training for community mentors, to train local people in helping others into further learning and supporting them.
- One ESOL class group would like to see more visits in the community, to get to know the community better, and a month-long work placement.
- The key is offering courses that interest people: *'You'll go to a class if it's something you're interested in, the work's interesting whereas if you are going to another class where the tutor isn't very forthcoming, the work's dull and boring, you wouldn't go back.'*

  [Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]

b) Better facilities

Recommendations about buildings reveal the poor state of many of the places where adult education classes (of all kinds) are being held. Several groups asked for better heating – their room either is too hot and stuffy or has no heat. Others would like to see larger rooms, for others it is important to stick with small groups where they feel more at ease:

> *'I would say somewhere on things like this, just a wee room with so many folk in it, not a lot of folk just enough, like this, this is ideal, there's five of us and one tutor, I would say that's enough. I think small groups work better than big groups, if there's only one tutor, one tutor has got to go round ten folk, she's only got five of us, we are all working quite easy and if you need help she'll come and give you help.'*
>
> ***[Fife, Other Adult Learner]***

There was disagreement about whether there should be new, purpose-built buildings – some would like them, others see them as too costly and would rather see scarce resources put into tutors, materials and computers.

Above all, many learners said they want to take courses in buildings that feel attractive (especially from the outside, to attract people in), comfortable and with an informal feel. They don't want 'college' type buildings. They want a place that has a comfortable atmosphere – 'a place like this' for some of them in community-based provision.

> *'Comfortable surroundings, like the course we've done here – we have a lovely room and access to tea and coffee, just the environment was pleasant. So if you had the right building, perhaps purpose-built building, for courses to be held in that was comfortable and not too formal I think it would be an attraction for people.'*
>
> ***[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]***

Several groups said they did not feel comfortable in a college because of the younger learners. *'I think maybe if it had been in a college or a school or whatever you would probably have felt intimidated, like this is for brainy folk, I won't fit in here.'*

[Fife, Other Adult Learner]

They want to be with 'people like us' — adults, other mums and so on. *'Maybe if*

there were more Mums, if we all did it together it would maybe make it easier ... because if I was wanting to go back [to college] I would have to go back with young people with no kids, and you're missing out a bit.'

[Aberdeen, Non-participant]

Accessibility was an important concern, both in terms of disabled access and in terms of transportation routes. They want to see local buildings used as much as possible (including opening up schools on Saturdays, and using closed school buildings), and even if the sites are not local they want adult education centres to be accessible to people from outlying areas. In talking about their own choice of courses, access and bus routes was an important consideration, along with time of day.

One focus group had a good discussion about having 'Education Shops' in local shopping areas – places where people could drop in and get advice and information about educational options, and also to get learning support when they need it. More on this discussion is in section f) below.

c) Expanded resources

Learners identified a variety of resources needed to operate the kinds of literacy and numeracy education they want. Central is providing enough tutors. Several groups were in large classes, where they have difficulty getting enough individual attention. For these, volunteers are the only way that learning can be supported. They want to see more paid tutors, smaller class sizes, and classroom assistants who can provide one-to-one support when needed.

Computers were the second most important resource wanted. Learners want to be able to use computers, but most schemes do not have enough. They may share a suite of computers between several classes, who take turns. They may even have to wait in turn for the one computer that is in an administrative office. Learners want to see computers and a variety of software available. One group suggested a 'computer bank' so that learners could take a computer home for practice:

Have a computer bank so that people who can't afford to buy computers can borrow one and hand it back.

[Lothian, Other Adult Learner]

One Highlands group of non-participants was excited by the potential of video-conferencing as a way for learners who are scattered in small, remote communities to link with each other and with the world.

Finally, some of the focus groups talked about the need for basic materials – books, paper, pencils. Several of the groups had books that were out of date, and they wanted to see programmes using up-to-date and relevant books and other materials.

d) Increased support services

Far and away the most discussed support service needed by participants is childcare. Most of the mothers with young children said they could only attend classes if there was a crèche. They would like a crèche that they can use not only when they are in the class itself but also when they want to study outside class hours. They pointed out the difficulty of studying at home with a house full of young children:

I so want to learn, so for me it would be to spend more time here actually working. Even having a day or an afternoon where you could come down and maybe have the crèche workers there so you could have your project and know that the kids are looked after.' ***[Lothian, ALN Learner]***

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They also pointed to the difficulty of going to the library to get information or study, when you have to take children with you. Transport is another support needed – some learners would like to see field trips to overcome their isolation, whether to the library or other sites. Without transportation they find it difficult even to go to the library (especially with the additional cost of transporting children as well as themselves).

Some learners suggested a need for guidance workers to support learning. They would like to have someone they can go to in order to find out about their options, and people who can advise them on other issues in their lives (housing, financial and so on). In their own experience most of the focus group participants had found it hard to get information about options, and certainly it was not all in one place:

'I think you have to go to different people, because there's always one contact gives you another and you just have to carry on until you get what you want. If you're lucky enough and you get what you want all in one place then fair enough, but I think nine times out of ten you have to continue pursuing until you get what you want.'

[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]

e) Financial assistance with costs and fees

Tuition costs were a matter of primary concern, especially to learners in FE colleges. They pointed out that the fees for courses prevented people studying. Computer courses in particular are often fee bearing, and therefore out of reach to many.

Other financial assistance was also discussed. *'Having your fees paid is alright but people still need to eat, to put a roof over their heads, clothes on their back, if the government could find a way* [to help them].'

[Aberdeen, ALN/FE Learner]

They suggested that for adult learners, any possibility of full-time education in further or higher education would be very difficult without some kind of additional financial support. One participant said he had been discouraged by New Deal from even thinking about further education. Several participants suggested that serious learners should be paid:

'I think they should pay us because if we were doing a job we'd be getting paid anyway. We're trying to better ourselves to be able to do a better job so while we're here we should be getting paid. It would be an encouragement for people to better themselves because we would be able to put something back into society, we wouldn't be stuck in a dead end job.'

[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]

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f) Publicity and outreach to new learners

Finally, learners had many ideas about how to reach out to new learners. *'People need to know about it.'* Publicity about courses is needed in many different forms – *'the places where everybody goes'*. Local newspapers can be a good place for ads.

Having the right kind of place for information is important to learners who have been out of education for a long time and are not confident about their own skills and needs. One participant from a family centre, not a current learner, said she felt comfortable in the local education centre but would not in a college:

> *'One of mine goes swimming in the local education centre, so obviously when he's in swimming lessons I'm walking up and down reading all the notices. The good thing there is you can walk in and pick up a programme, it's not frightening. If I walked into college I think I would be like whoa, because someone would say what can I do for you, I'm like help! I would probably say I've got the wrong building, sorry.'*
>
> ***[Aberdeen, Non-participant]***

Focus group participants had many ideas about places to get out information about learning opportunities for people like them:

- Posters in local shops
- Supermarket notice-boards and till receipts in supermarkets
- Buses
- Vets and doctors offices
- Notice-boards in schools, libraries, community centres, doctors' surgeries, Job Centres, works canteens, swimming pools
- Radio ads and shows, especially ones that use current learners to talk about their experiences
- Television ads — several had seen ads for LearnDirect, though they thought it was only for college courses, not for literacy and numeracy and adult education.

g) Changing the culture of learning

Most participants felt that simply putting out information is not enough: there needs to be national change in the culture of learning. People need to see learning as positive, as something they can and want to do. They had a variety of suggestions for how to accomplish this. Participants from villages and small towns especially felt that word of mouth was the main way to get information out.

Some see themselves as a resource in reaching out to others. Learners may be eager to share what they have learned. One Highlands group suggested using radio interviews with learners who have completed a course.

> *'Your suggestion was Nevis Radio, if we got another course started, take each one of us and each give a talk and say how we were. That would reach far more people because we are normal people who were really insecure and not confident. We now feel that we have gained so much from this course that we can go out and say to our next door neighbour, oh, you know this course was absolutely fantastic. And you can go and sit in a radio station and say to a*

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couple of hundred people this course was absolutely fantastic, because you are confident and you know that you succeeded on that course. I feel that would reach far more people than putting a leaflet through the door which people will pick up, look at it and put it in the bin.

[Highlands, Other Adult Learner]

Some groups felt there was a need for a central information point in every town, where people can find out about learning options. One group suggested an Education Shop to meet that need.

'Just a drop-in centre during the week where if anyone's got problems they could go in and there would be all sorts of leaflets and information and people that you could talk to.'

'If people have a desire for education then where better than an education shop in the High Street of your own town.'

[Aberdeen, ALN Learners]

In another focus group with non-participants in a small Highlands community, participants strongly supported the idea of a local adult education adviser who could provide a link between residents and learning opportunities:

'An Adviser or something that can come round and let folk know exactly what is available to them and then if there is enough folk interested then start up something locally…'

'If they went round villages with a sort of roadshow with a selection of things that could be made available to communities.'

[Highlands, Non-participants]

A few learners talked about the potential to use television to reach new learners, both in terms of advertising classes that are available, and in delivering learning. The Open University was seen as a model of accessible learning, but at a level that is too high for them. One non-participant in a family centre said:

'I'm actually looking out at the minute to go and actually do something because I feel brain dead, but I don't feel there's anything for me, like going and doing English and maths and that. I'm just like whoa, it's been X amount of years since I left school let alone anything else. At least Open University seems to be hours to suit, because you can record their programmes and they have got the telephone lines. But it's just getting the motivation again, when you read what they've got to offer it's really daunting, because it's 16-17 years since I left school. Can't they have back to basics?'

[Aberdeen, Non-participant]

Others suggested a television campaign could provide information about learning options and generate interest. *'A national television campaign encouraging people or at least giving them the option, giving them the information to generate interest in raising your awareness in your own educational level.'*

[Aberdeen, ALN/FE Learner]

One person remembered the BBC's literacy campaign of the 1970s, 'On the Move,' and said it was no longer on – *'I don't know why. It's just disappeared. Let's face it, every year people still have difficulties reading and writing and people watching it can take the number from the tv.'*

[Glasgow, ALN Learner]

He suggested that its time had come again.

It will take a change in attitude to get more people back into learning. The literacy and numeracy learners in our focus groups say they are made to feel 'thick', ashamed of having difficulties with reading and writing. They want to see advertising used to change that attitude.

'I would like Mr. McLeish to spend it on advertising so that people don't feel out of place or living in fear of being found out. Taking the shame away from it. Just an advert showing a guy totally confident and knowing that he can't read or write, going along to a class and doing it. Not being paranoid that somebody is going to find out. Just own up to it, give people the confidence to go ahead and do something. It needs to be done, especially in this day and age.' ***[Glasgow, Other Adult Learner]***

h) Listening to Learners

New learners, and especially ALN learners, often lack confidence that their own views are valuable. Participants in the consultation suggested that this could be overcome by the influence of more experienced peer learners who can reassure them. Discussions rather than written formats may be a better way of gathering input from these groups, and other learners may be in the best position to engage learners. One focus group discussed the possibility of an additional meeting time each week for peer tutoring:

'It would be good if we could get a room available even once a week for an hour, and we could all get together without [tutor] being there, and we could all discuss how we're doing and help each other out. Because one of us might find something's easy and be able to handle it and someone might find it difficult.

[Lothian, Other Adult Learner]

One ALN group in an FE college came up with an idea for a class representative who combines consultation and guidance roles:

'We should have a class rep who knows everything, who knows where you go for guidance and support, and chats to everybody. Then if anyone has any problems try and get them answered from higher up.'

'I thought it was really good about the class rep., also having a meeting maybe once a week with your tutor. We never ever see our tutor and it would just be nice to have maybe half an hour a week where we could discuss certain points that come up, write them down and maybe find solutions to them rather than work through them all by ourselves.'

[Aberdeen, ALN/FE Learners]

Structures such as Learner Forums, representatives and committees are not easy to sustain. They encounter problems with setting meeting times (difficult to work around the other commitments of learners). There is an interest among some learners in seeing these established. Such structures would need to be:

- Accessible (meeting times, text use)
- Regular (become part of the culture of the programme)
- Clear mechanisms for participation of part-time and adult learners (in FE colleges not just full-time 16-19 year old students)
- Responded to (all learners need to know what they are doing, what decisions are being made, and how their input has impacted decisions).

When we asked how they would want to see extra funding for adult literacy and numeracy education spent, some of the groups expressed scepticism that the money would really be spent on adult learning, or that it would be spent on what learners think are the most important things:

'Will they really do it, will the money really come?' ***[Fife, ALN/FE Learner]***

'If they're saying to us that they're going to listen to our thoughts then I think they should show us that they've used the money on us, because 9 times out of 10 when somebody says to you they've got this money to spend you never actually see. So I think they should make it clear to us that they're doing something about it and no just hide it away and say, well, we've done this when that wasn't one of the big issues we talked about.'

[Lothian, Other Adult Learner]

9 Conclusions

The learner consultation has confirmed some issues we might have expected, and raised some important concerns from the learner perspective. This final section briefly summarises some of the key concerns raised by the consultation.

Information: First, there is a remarkable lack of information about learning opportunities, even among learners who are on courses. Several strategies are needed to ensure that potential learners know what is available:

- More consistent use of existing learners as resources (asking them to bring a friend, providing them with information to take home, inviting them to make presentations at open days and community events). Not all will be willing to do all of these activities, but there was a strong expression of willingness to spread the word.
- Better publicity and marketing approaches and materials, using some of the outlets learners recommend – supermarkets and shops, buses, local radio, community centres, swimming pools, doctors' and vets' offices.
- Make it easier for people to have their questions answered – perhaps taking up learner suggestions of 'education shops' in local high streets, or better information services at the main educational providers so that people don't get passed around from pillar to post when trying to get information.
- Extend professional referrals, making sure that health visitors, social workers, doctors, nurses and Job Centre staff are aware of and have information about the local learning options.

Accessibility: The issues around access, and barriers to access, for adult learners are well known, but not yet overcome. Childcare is needed, to include study time as well as class time. Provision needs to be local enough that travel is easy, and offered at different times of day to suit learner needs. Not only should classes be free, but learners often say they need financial support for travel, childcare and other costs. Other concerns are about support for learners with particular needs, including disabled access to buildings, interpreters for Deaf students, language support for non-English speakers. Barriers are not just overcome once, in order to enter a programme, but are ongoing, having to be surmounted time and again in order to persist and progress.

Choice and control: Provision should offer diversity in terms not only of time and place of classes but also a variety of educational approaches. Although participants emphasised that they wanted to be treated as adults and not children, they were not offered as much choice or control over their learning patterns as some would like. While others said they wanted to leave decisions up to the 'expert', their tutor, that seems to come from lack of confidence rather than lack of insight into what their needs are. Non-participants especially talked about wanting to learn for enjoyment, that classes had to interest them for them to enrol.

Progress and progression: Progress in adult education is often measured by educators in terms of acquisition of skills, or completion of modules. Learners themselves sometimes want the reassurance of their tutor telling them they are making progress, but many have their own ways of identifying their learning in terms of application of skills, and changes in their literacy practices. Assessment approaches should take account of application more than acquisition, because learning goals are mostly about being able to do things in life.

There is very little emphasis on progression from ALN into other things – whether jobs or further education. It makes a striking contrast with the other learners who also have very few educational qualifications and have been out of education for many years, but nevertheless are thinking about 'what next'. None of the ALN learners talked about their future plans. Without putting pressure on learners who may have a long way to go to be ready for next steps, ALN could open up a sense of possibilities and options by providing information for learners and the chance to explore options.

Changing the culture of learning: At the national level, learners are looking for leadership in terms of changing the culture of learning. The Government, media and educational institutions all have roles to play in this culture change. More resources for adult education would increase its visibility in the community. Television and newspapers can help make learning a more 'normal' part of everyday life, and address the stigma still often associated with adult literacy learning. Adult learners themselves can play a bigger role in reaching out to others, and sharing what they have gained.

Listening to learners: Finally, learners point out that they know better than anyone what they want, what experiences they are having and how they could be improved. To make the best use of this resource learners have to be asked. More consistent and formal methods for evaluation and feedback are needed. Both discussion and written methods need to be:

- Confidential (so that comments can be made about tutors);
- Accessible (in terms of language and form);
- Regular, expected parts of programme activities;
- Easily used (e.g. suggestion boxes and comment cards);
- Responded to (feedback on what the student views were and what decisions were taken as a result).

Feedback from consultation is essential so that learners will know their voices have been listened and responded to. Where changes cannot be made an explanation should be provided. To consult learners as an exercise without providing feedback on what was done as a result would only increase scepticism, and decrease willingness to participate in consultation in the future. Providing feedback, even when many suggestions cannot be acted up for resource or other reasons, would provide learners with a sense that they are involved, important and respected.

Listening to learners should happen at all levels of the adult literacy and numeracy education system. There should be consultation within each individual class, with learners evaluating their course. Consultation at the programme level should be used to identify new course provision and revise existing courses, train new tutors and inform programme management. At the community level, learner consultation should provide valuable input to planning and quality assurance. At the regional or national level, ongoing learner consultation should identify issues and generate innovative solutions. Developing an adult education system that learns requires us to listen to learners, and pay attention to what they say.

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